DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 413 CS 209 318

AUTHOR Benesch, Sarah
TITLE Metaresponse: A Hidden Benefit of Peer Writing Instruction.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference (4th, Houston, TX, March 28-30, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; Higher Education; *Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; *Peer Teaching; *Writing (Composition); Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Freshman Composition; *Metaresponse

ABSTRACT

In order to find out what a three-member peer group in freshman composition was discussing during their meetings and how--if at all--they talked about writing, their conversations about their first drafts for the class were taped and analyzed. Analysis showed that in addition to discussion of their drafts (text talk) and social chat (off-task talk), the students also talked about the assignment, group procedures, and feedback (mataresponse). Of the five categories (text, assignment, metaresponse, procedures, and off-task), metaresponse revealed the most about what the students were and were not doing in the group. It gave them a way to vent frustration, express confusion, and negotiate new ways of interacting, while providing feedback for the teacher. Analysis showed that more inservice training in reading, responding, and using feedback to revise would have been helpful, and pointed to the problems caused by using teacher-generated assignments in a workshop that was supposed to be collaboratively run. Perhaps most importantly, findings indicated that when students are given some instruction in reading and responding to one another's drafts, they may spend time discussing the complexity of reading and writing. Peer writing instruction provides group members with the opportunity to discover and discuss the difficulties of composing, reading, responding, and revising. (DF)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED262413

# "Metaresponse: A Hidden Benefit of Peer Writing Instruction"

Sarah Benesch
New York University
April, 1985

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sarah Benesch

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."



CS 209 318

Most research to date on peer group writing instruction falls into two categories: the theoretical which has posed hypotheseses about the value of peer group talk (Bruffee 1973, Elbow 1981) and; the experimental studies which have compared collaborative and traditional approaches to writing instruction (Clifford 1977, Fox 1980). There is, however, a third category of research, the empirical studies, which have described the actual talk of peer writing group members. Researchers in this third category, such as Danis (1980) and Gere (1982), test claims about the benefits of peer writing instruction by studying transcripts of peer group talk and/or student drafts.

My own research, a study of the talk of one three-member peer group, falls into the third category. The peer group members, who were students in one of my freshman composition classes, taped all of their conversations about their first drafts and I transcribed and analyzed the talk in order to find out what they were discussing during their meetings and how, if at all, they talked about writing. The initial category system, a bi-polar schema of Text talk and Off-Task talk, was amplified to reflect the themes that emerged during analysis of the transcribed talk (Barnes & Todd, 1977). The students, Ann, Pascale and Mark, did not simply divide their time between discussion of their drafts on the one hand (Text) and social chat on the other (Off-Task); they also talked about the Assignment, about Procedures, or nuts and bolts of managing the group, and about the feedback itself, what I call Metaresponse. These five types of talk--Text, Assignment, Meta-response, Procedures and Off-Task--make

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

up the content categories of the coding system. Each of these categories appears below with the percentage of total peer group talk it represented.

| CONTENT CATEGORIES: | |
|---|---|
| Text | 59% |
| Assignment | 16% |
| Procedures | 12% |
| Meta-response | 11% |
| Off-Task | 2% |

Of all the types of talk appearing in the transcripts, Meta-response was the most revealing of what the students were and were not doing in the group. I will focus on this category in order to discuss aspects of the peer group interaction which first surprised me, then disturbed me and now encourage me. Meta-response is talk about responding. It includes: 1) commentary about a particular response offered by a reader; 2) discussion of the way the conversation seems to the participants to be progressing and; 3) a collective sorting out of the way the talk should be progressing according to the students' perceptions of the teacher's agenda or of good feedback. Meta-response was surprising because I had not anticipated that the students, in practically every meeting, would spend time, as do mature writers and collaborators, questioning and examining what they were doing. Meta-response was at once the most gratifying and unnerving talk to read; it demonstrated that the



BEST COPY AVAILA

students were actually consulting one another about the group's activities and collaborating about how to proceed, but it also demonstrated that they were confused about the purpose of the responding, about the reader's role and about the instructions they had received from the teacher. The excerpts in Appendices one and two illustrate both the gratifying and unnerving quality of metaresponse. The first excerpt (Appendix one) is from the end of a session during which Pascale and Mark were responding to one of Ann's drafts. The teacher-generated assignment had been to choose a building or room and to speculate about the architect's intentions in designing it. In this excerpt, Ann elicits some more feedback from her readers: "So you think it's alright or what?" Mark and Pascale then reassure Ann that it's alright: "Sure it's alright." "I love it." "It's very nice." Then Pascale, reflecting on the danger of receiving global praise from one's peers, comments on the feedback she and Mark have just offered: "That's what they used to do to me last year...I'd read my thing and they'd say, 'Oh, it's great.' I'd get like a 'B.'" Ann, who feels frustrated by the feedback she received, agrees with Pascale's assessment of the danger of receiving praise. She seems to want her peers to provide more critical feedback which she could use in revising her draft before turning it in for evaluation: "That's why I'm always prompting...That's why I'm saying, 'Come on.'" Mark, who has already suggested to Ann that she add another paragraph about her feelings towards the room she is describing, protests that he has done his job of giving adequate feedback: "Didn't I tell you? But



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

in my two cents." Ann then concedes that she has taken his feedback into account: "No, you did. That's good. I have to put another paragraph about that." And Mark and Pascale again reassure Ann that her paper is good, Mark through global praise: "It's good. It's nice." and Pascale by pointing out that Ann has followed the assignment guidelines: "Yeah. I think you put the architect's intent here: 'Designed to assist the professor in teaching, the architect has made this classroom to ressemble a little theater.'" Ann's tone of resignation at the end of this session suggests that she is dissatisfied with the feedback she received. This episode of Meta-response demonstrates that: 1) while the writer was displeased with her readers' responses she did not know how to elicit the type of feedback she wanted; 2) the readers were most comfortable either giving global praise or making suggestions for revision based on their own stylistic preferences and; 3) the writer and readers recognized the inadequacy of the feedback being offered, yet were not sufficiently trained to extend their repetoire of responses. As the teacher/researcher I was pleased that the students acknowledged that feedback does not necessarily consist only of praise and of suggestions for revision, but I also noted that they had not received enough instruction in eliciting and experimenting with additional forms of response, such as paraphrasing and questioning.

The second episode of Meta-response (Appendix two) reveals even more about the students confusion about: their roles in the group; the criteria of good feedback; the impact of the assignment on writing and responding; and the role of feedback in revision. The



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

confusion, though, seems to be positive; it pushes the students to come to terms with complex issues related to writing, responding, and revising. Pascale is the writer in this excerpt. The assignment is the same as that in the first example. Just before this episode of extended metaresponse, Mark has been suggesting that Pascale add more personal information while Ann has been saying that the intimacy of Pascale's description of the family room in her house is not appropriate for the assignment. The apparent contradiction between her readers' feedback leads Pascale to comment: "Wait a second. But it seems like you're saing opposite things. Like you're saying, 'Be more architecturally-minded,' and you're saying, 'Be more personal.'" Mark then raises questions (and this begins the excerpt in Appendix two) about the criteria they are using to respond to Pascale's draft: "Let me ask you this: what were you looking for? Like how well she fulfills the assignment? Like what's the criteria we're looking for? Cause sometimes it becomes a little hazy. How we would write it if we were doing it? How well she describes or how well she deals with the assignment?" Mark is trying to establish what role the assignment should play in responding and to explore the possibility of giving feedback that is influenced only by the reading of the writer's draft: "Should it be...it should be just like a gut reaction to the paper; this is what we hear, this is how we feel, right? Take it or leave it, right? That's how it should be." By raising these questions, Mark gets Ann to reflect on the possibility that she was relying solely on her own interpretation of the assignment to respond to Pascale's


BEST COPY AVAILAB

craft: "I'm sorry if I sound like I'm saying how I want it to be." She begins to consider other criteria of response: "It's just what I don't think is right...what sounds...what doesn't sound like it belongs to me." While Ann and Mark are negotiating alternative ways of giving feedback, Pascale raises another issue: how to use both teacher guidelines and peer feedback to write and revise: "...when I was writing this I was wondering what she wanted, O.K.? Cause the last paper I wrote, O.K. - if you remember this - I interpreted very, very strictly from the Paper A for metaphor. And you both said, 'Oh, you have to be more personal about it.' So I do this paper and I get personal and then you're like, you know..." Pascale is really talking about ownership of text. That is, what guides my choices as a writer: the teacher, my peers or me? Mark then tells Pascale that no matter what her readers advise during a feedback session, the decision of how to revise is her own: "It's just like suggestions for...cause yours is the final draft." And Ann reminds Pascale that while there are teacher-generated assignment guidelines, these may be interpreted loosely: "...because she says, [she being the teacher] 'Well, just take my basic idea.' And then you can do anything about it."

While these difficult problems related to interpreting the assignment, writing a first draft, giving and receiving peer response and revising are not solved during this episode of Meta-response, they are identified as problems and then discussed. There is an implicit recognition of the complexity of the issues and of the activities of writing and responding.



BEST COPY AVAILAL

Meta-response, however, does not only function as a way for the students to vent their frustration, express their confusion and negotiate new ways of interacting; it is also a feedback system for the teacher. By studying what Ann, Pascale and Mark had to say about peer and teacher feedback, it was possible to see what might have been done to define their roles and the purpose of the activities more clearly. It seems obvious in retrospect that while there was perhaps sufficient preliminary training in reading and responding critically to drafts, there should have been more on-going training once the students were in their groups and running into difficulty. That is, while the instruction was strong in pre-service training, it was weak in in-service. And as those involved in teacher training have discovered, we cannot expect new ways of interacting, whether they be teacher/student or student/student, to be learned and implemented after only a few workshops.

Aside from the finding that more in-service training in reading, responding and using feedback to revise might have been helpful, the study also pointed to the problem of using teacher-generated assignments in a writing workshop which is supposed to be collaboratively-run. Having the teacher's assignment as a guide to their writing led the students to come to the peer group meetings with a great deal of investment in a particular way of fulfilling the shared assignment. This investment seems to have gotten in the way of attending to and accepting the other writers' choices. Pascale's Meta-response towards the end of the second excerpt, and other similar comments throughout the transcripts, about the



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

difficulty of reconciling the teacher's assignment, peer feedback and her own intentions suggest that I ought to have either invited the students to develop their own individual assignments, thus eliminating the high degree of prior expectation with which the drafts were received, or that there should have been demonstrations of how one common assignment can lead to many different and equally valid interpretations.

So much for the disturbing but instructive feedback about my teaching provided by Meta-response. This type of talk is also very encouraging. It demonstrates that when students are given some instruction in reading and responding to one anothers' drafts, they may spend time doing what we do: that is, discussing the complexity of writing and reading. The questions my students asked one another were the same as those we ask our colleagues: what is the function of an assignment? (Schuster, 1984); what are the criteria of good feedback? (Elbow, 1981); how much of reader response should be devoted to praise, to suggestions for revision and to questions about meaning? (Healy, 1980, Carnicelli 1980); how can a reader approach a text with few preconceptions of how it ought to be written? (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982); how can feedback be used to revise? (Coell & Tompkins, 1975). Meta-response shows that these research questions are the domain not only of teachers of composition, but also of the students. Peer writing instruction provides group members the opportunity to discover and discuss the difficulties of composing, reading, responding and revising. This is one of its hidden benefits.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

References

Barnes, D. and Todd, F. Communication and Learning in Small Groups. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.

Brannon, L. and Knoblauch, C.H. "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." College Composition and Communication, 33 (May 1982): 148-56.

Bruffee, K.A. "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models." College English, 34 (Feb. 1973): 634-43.

Carnicelli, Thomas. "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." In Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1980: 101-31.

Clifford, J. "An Experimental Inquiry Into the Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning as a Method for Improving the Experiential Writing Performance of College Freshmen in a Remedial Writing Class." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1977.

Davis, Mary Francire, CPD. "Peer-Response Groups in a College Writing Workshop: Students' Suggestions for Revising Compositions." Unpublished disseration, Michigan State University, 1980.

Elbow, Peter. Writing with Power. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Fox, R. "Treatment of Writing Apprehension and Its Effect on Composition." Research in the Teaching of English, 14 (Feb 1980): 39-49.

Gere, Anne R. "Students' Oral Responses to written Composition." ED 299 781, 1982.

Healy, Mary K. Using Student writing Response in the Classroom. Curriculum Porject No. 12. University of California, Berkeley: Bay Area writing Project, 1980.

Odell, L. and Conick, J. "You Mean Write It Over In Ink?" English Journal, 64 (Dec 1975), 48-53.

Schuster, Charles I. "The Un-Assignment: Writing Groups for Advanced Expository Writers." Freshman English News, 13 (Winter 1984): 4-14.

BEST COPY

Beresch, Appendix One

"eta-response, Ann's Draft, Example #1:

Ann: So, you think it's alright or what?

Mark: Sure it's alright.

Pascale: I love it.

Mark: It's very nice.

Pascale: That's what they used to do to me last year. META-RESPONSE

Ann: That's why I'm always prompting. META-RESPONSE

Pascale: I'd read my thing and they'd say, "Oh, it's great." I'd get like a B. META-RESPONSE

Ann: That's why I'm saying, "Come on." META-RESPONSE

Mark: Didn't I tell you? Put in my two cents. META-RESPONSE

Ann: No, you did. That's good. META-RESPONSE
I should put another paragraph about that.

Mark: It's good. It's nice.

Pascale: Yeah. I think you put the architect's intent here: Designed to assist the professor in teaching, the architect has made this classroom to resemble a little theater."

Ann: (resignedly) Yeah, O.K. Alright, next.

BEST COPY

Beresch, Appendix Two

Metaresponse, Pascale's Draft, Example #2:

Mark: Let me ask you this: what were you looking for? Like how well she fulfills the assignment? Like what's the criteria we're looking for? Cause sometimes it becomes a little hazy. How we would write it if we were doing it?

Ann: No. First about a room or a building and -

Mark: How well she describes or how well she deals with the assignment?

Ann: Right. And like it says, what the elements communicate to you. But otherwise I guess you can go off on any tangent you want. I'm sorry if I sound like I'm saying how I want it to be.

Pascale: No, no, no.

Ann: It's just what I don't think is right...what sounds...what doesn't sound like it belongs to me.

Mark: Should it be...it should be just like a gut reaction to the paper; this is what we hear, this is how we feel, right? Take it or leave it, right? That's how it should be.

Pascale: No, listen. There's one thing, though -

Ann: Right, I don't want anyone feeling bad.

Pascale: No, I'm not feeling bad at all. As a matter of fact, when I was writing this I was wondering what she wanted, O.K.? Cause the last paper I wrote, O.K. - if you remember this - I interpreted very strictly from the Paper A for metaphor. And you both said, "Oh you have to be more personal about it." So I do this paper and I get personal and then you're like, you know. So, you know, I just -

Mark: No, no, it's alright. You say, "You have to be , you have to be..." It's just like suggestions for...cause yours is the final -

Pascale: Yeah.

Ann: No, because she says, "Well, just take my basic idea." And then you can do anything about it. So, I don't know.

 BEST COPY